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Syria's Strategy and Assets in Lebanon

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An Intelligence Assessment

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted] Office
of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It was
coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. [redacted]

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, NESAs,

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**Syria's Strategy and
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Key Judgments*Information available
as of 3 September 1984
was used in this report.*

Syria, we believe, will remain the dominant foreign power in Lebanon for some time. Its central role will ensure that the Lebanese Government continues to press for Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon with no political gains. Damascus will encourage indirect Lebanese-Israeli withdrawal negotiations, but it will also sponsor increasing terrorism against Israeli forces.

Damascus, in our view, possesses the assets and determination to prevent Israel or the United States from reestablishing preeminent influence over the Lebanese Government. The Syrians clearly want to limit the role the United States can play in the region. Nonetheless, Syrian leaders believe they need US assistance to end the Israeli occupation and want the United States to take the lead in negotiating new security arrangements for the south. Any such negotiations probably will fail, however, unless they take Syrian interests into account.

Syria's basic objectives in Lebanon are to ensure that the Lebanese Government remains susceptible to Syrian influence and to bring about an Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon. The Syrians are determined to prevent Beirut from making a separate peace with Israel and fear that continued Israeli occupation leaves western Syria open to attack by Israeli ground forces. In our view, the Syrians believe they have a long-term stake in Lebanon and are determined to remain intimately involved there regardless of the costs. Even the death of Syrian President Assad would be unlikely to alter Damascus's strategy in Lebanon.

We believe President Assad will maintain regular Syrian forces in Lebanon but will prefer to use Lebanese surrogates to pursue Syrian objectives. Syria supports and exercises considerable influence over Druze and Muslim militias as well as Palestinian guerrilla organizations active in Lebanon. Damascus also maintains contacts within Lebanon's Christian community, which the Syrians believe will continue to play a key role in the government and Army.

Syrian leaders believe they won a major victory when the Multinational Force withdrew from Lebanon last winter, and they now want to stabilize the status quo in and around Beirut. They will support President Amin Gemayel, who capitulated to their demands for the abrogation of the Lebanese-Israeli accord and the appointment of a pro-Syrian Cabinet last winter, as long as he remains obedient to Damascus.

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The Syrians do not expect to impose a comprehensive political settlement on the warring Lebanese factions in the short run. Syrian efforts to establish a new political order in Lebanon during the past decade have failed. Damascus, therefore, is adopting an incremental approach, initially limiting its efforts to improving the security situation in Beirut and the surrounding mountains. It will also continue to promote a rough equality of power among the major factions in the civil war to maintain its pivotal influence.

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Syria wants to establish a stable government in Lebanon that is closely tied to Damascus rather than Israel. The Syrians consider Lebanon integral to their national security and intend to maintain their preeminent influence over events there. In our judgment, Syrian policy toward Lebanon is also shaped by the Assad regime's determination to be the pivotal power in the region. The Syrians want to be the decisive factor in any negotiations aimed at a regional settlement with Israel.

The Syrians argue that the continued Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon poses a threat to Syrian territory. Syrian officials are keenly aware that Israeli troops in Lebanon are deployed less than 30 kilometers from Damascus. The relative ease with which Israeli forces overran Syrian positions in Lebanon and decimated the Syrian Air Force over Lebanon in 1982 demonstrated to Damascus its vulnerability to an Israeli attack through Lebanon.

Syrian officials also justify the presence of Syrian troops in Lebanon on historical grounds. Lebanon was part of Syria until the French Government created it as a separate entity after World War I. Many Syrians still consider Lebanon a part of "Greater Syria." The Syrian Government does not maintain an embassy in Beirut, and there is no Lebanese embassy in Damascus.

In our judgment, however, Damascus has failed to establish a stable, pro-Syrian political order in Lebanon despite the considerable attention and resources it has devoted there during the past decade. The Syrian Army's intervention in the Lebanese civil war in 1976—belatedly sanctioned by the Arab League—ended large-scale hostilities for several years but did not address the underlying political grievances and hatred among Lebanon's Christians, Druze, Muslims, and Palestinians. The Syrian occupation has failed to stop the sporadic violence and festering internal tension.

Attitude Toward Lebanese Civil War

The Syrians no longer believe they can impose a settlement on the warring factions in the short run, in our judgment. Syrian officials dismiss the notion that a "magical" solution to the civil war is possible, according to the US Embassy. Damascus, therefore, has adopted a pragmatic, incremental approach in Lebanon and is focusing its immediate efforts on stabilizing the security situation in and around Beirut.

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Syrian efforts to bring about a comprehensive political settlement during the past year failed.

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Damascus put pressure on Lebanese factional leaders to reach an agreement during national reconciliation talks at Lausanne last March.

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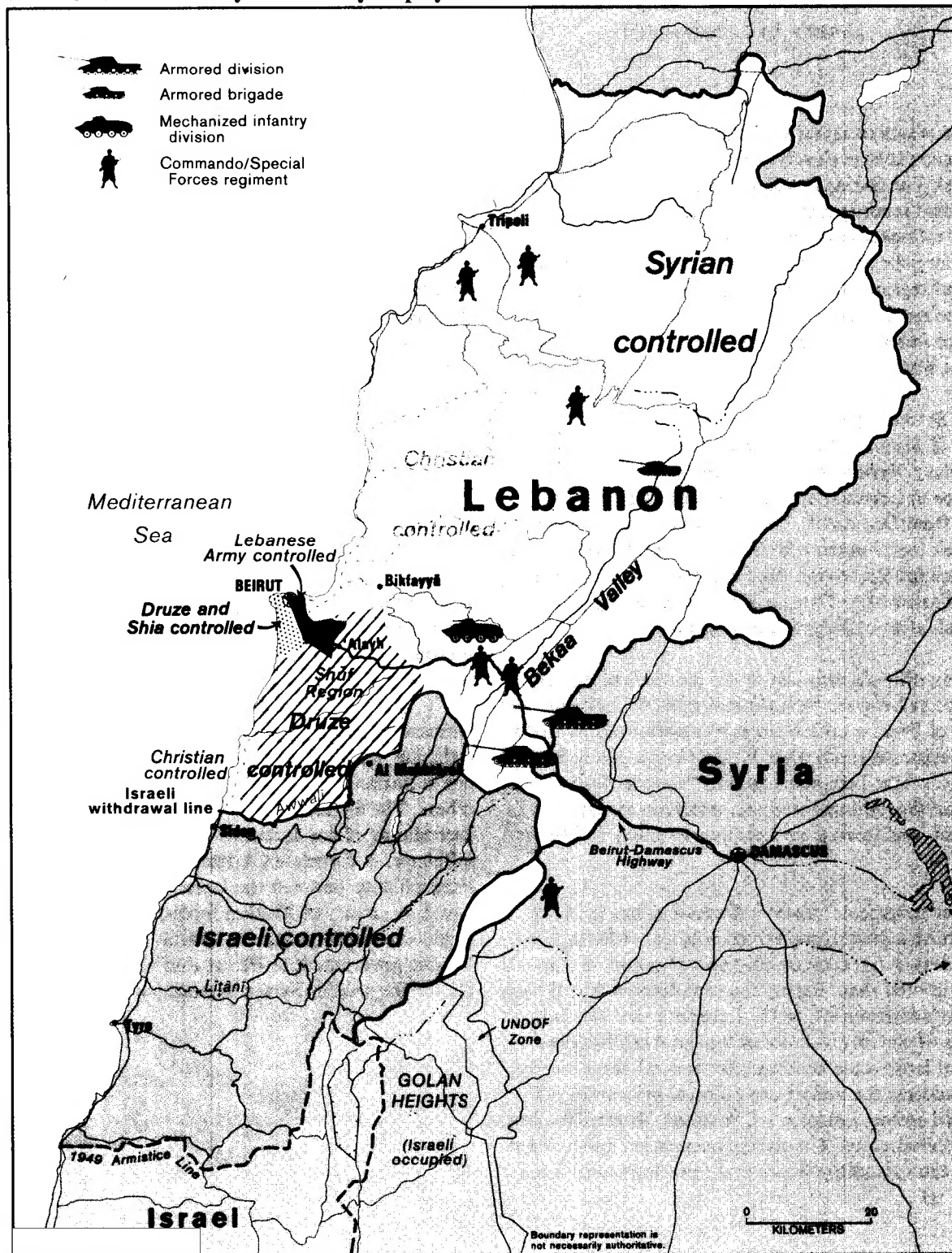
Damascus, unable to establish a new political order in Lebanon, has settled for a policy of preventing any one sectarian group from gaining dominance over the others. The Syrians almost certainly believe that the ascendancy of one faction would sharply reduce their influence. A complete Christian victory might result in an alliance between the Lebanese Government and Israel. A victory of Muslim forces, on the other hand, might eventually produce a radical or fundamentalist Islamic government in Beirut that would cause trouble for the secular Syrian regime.

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Areas of Control and Syrian Military Deployment



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Syria's Latest Security Plan for Lebanon

Syrian Vice President Khaddam traveled to the Christian town of Bikfayya on 19 June to launch Syria's current initiative in Lebanon. Khaddam, impatient with the lack of progress in stabilizing the security situation in and around Beirut, persuaded Lebanese factional leaders to agree on a new comprehensive plan, dubbed the Bikfayya accord. The accord provides for:

- *Some redistribution of Lebanese Army posts among the confessional groups.*
- *The establishment of a military committee to study ways to restructure the Army.*
- *A security plan that envisions Lebanese Army units deploying throughout greater Beirut and eventually the surrounding mountains as well.*

Damascus attached a high priority to the security-related parts of the accord,

the Syrian Army would not tolerate resistance to the accord by any group. The Lebanese Army did deploy throughout West Beirut in July, but the plan has since bogged down over Druze and Christian opposition to Army deployment in their areas of control. The Syrians, however, remain committed to the accord and continue to put pressure on factional leaders to cooperate.

We believe the Syrians favor an eventual redistribution of power in Lebanon to satisfy Druze and Muslim demands, but they do not want to provoke a violent Maronite Christian reaction. Syrian Vice President Khaddam has met with Lebanese factional and government leaders frequently in recent months to try to work out agreements on a redistribution of Lebanese Army and intelligence posts.

Syrian officials believe that Lebanon's Shia Muslims in particular will not tolerate indefinite Christian domination of the political system. Nonetheless, the Syrians want to stabilize the security situation and therefore are not advocating immediate, far-reaching political reforms.

Support for the Gemayel Government

The Syrians accept the principle of a Maronite Christian remaining president and are willing to work with President Amin Gemayel despite his Phalange background.

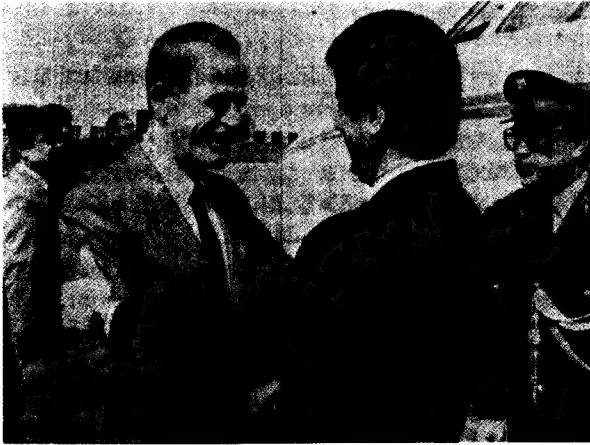
Gemayel's negotiations with Israel and his eagerness to increase US involvement in Lebanon, however, prompted the Syrians to put political and military pressure on him throughout last fall and winter to force him to deal with Damascus.

Syrian tactics included threatening to use Syrian artillery against the Lebanese Army, mobilizing opposition militias, and stirring up resistance to the government in the Lebanese parliament, according to US Embassy reporting

Gemayel capitulated to the Syrians following the defeat of the Lebanese Army at the hands of Syrian-backed militias and the withdrawal of the US Multinational Force contingent in late February. He met with Assad in Damascus in March and agreed to abrogate the accord with Israel and to appoint opposition leaders, most of whom are susceptible to Syrian influence, to a new Cabinet. The Syrians then dropped their opposition to the Lebanese Government.

Syrian leaders decided to support Gemayel's presidency because they believed he would be more responsive to Syrian demands in the future,

Damascus concluded that Druze and Muslim control of West Beirut had weakened Gemayel's position and would henceforth compel him to take Syrian concerns into account.



Syrian President Assad welcomes Gemayel to Damascus following the victory of pro-Syrian forces in West Beirut last March



Syrian troops in eastern Lebanon

Syrian Assets and Shifting Alliances

Syrian regular forces control most of eastern and northern Lebanon, but the Syrian Government prefers to work through Lebanese surrogates to achieve its objectives in Lebanon. Damascus keeps two reinforced divisions and several Special Forces regiments—totaling about 45,000 men—in Lebanon in addition to numerous Syrian advisers and supervisors who work directly with Lebanese factional militias. According to [redacted] defense attache reports, Syrian intelligence officers operate throughout Lebanon, providing support to various factional elements. [redacted]

Syrian occupation forces deny the Lebanese Government control of Tripoli, the northern mountains, and the Bekaa Valley and add weight to Syria's political leverage. Two Lebanese Army brigades stationed in Syrian-controlled areas, for example, are virtually held hostage. Syrian artillery east of Bikfayya can strike the Beirut area and the Christian heartland north of Beirut. Nonetheless, the Syrians prefer indirect involvement in the civil war, as demonstrated by the fact that Syrian units did not participate in the fighting last fall and winter. [redacted]

The Syrians' most effective method of influencing events in Lebanon is manipulating a wide range of Lebanese political and military organizations. Damascus supplies and directs the activities of a number of

Druze and Muslim militias and political parties. The Syrians also cultivate relationships with the Christian community, including the Lebanese Forces militia and the Phalange Party. [redacted]

Syrian involvement across the Lebanese political spectrum enables them to maintain a rough balance of power among the Lebanese factions and government. When the Syrians want to challenge the Christian-dominated government, they can mobilize their Druze and Muslim allies. When the Syrians want to support the government, they can strengthen their Christian contacts and put pressure on the Druze and Muslims to cooperate with the government. [redacted]

Syrian relations with the Lebanese factions have fluctuated during the past decade. Syria intervened in the Lebanese civil war in 1976 on the side of the Christian Phalange against the Druze and Muslims. During the late 1970s, however, Damascus switched sides as the Christian militia developed close ties with Israel. The Syrians again attempted to improve their relations with the Christians after the election of Amin Gemayel in 1982, according to the US Embassy, but Christian support for the Lebanese-Israeli accord in 1983 prompted renewed Syrian support for the Druze and Muslims. [redacted]

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Relations With the Druze

Syria's most effective Lebanese asset during the past year has been the predominantly Druze Progressive Socialist Party militia.

The Druze spearheaded the assault on the Lebanese Army during the fighting in the Shuf Region in September 1983 and were instrumental in the seizure of West Beirut by opposition forces last February.

The Druze militia has been dependent on Syrian-supplied weapons and ammunition since 1975. The Druze probably obtain large quantities of small arms on the open market or from abandoned Palestinian caches in Beirut and the mountains, but they depend on Syria for heavy artillery, ammunition, and armored personnel carriers, which they need to resist the Christian Lebanese Forces militia and the Lebanese Army. The Druze, moreover, are attempting to convert their militia into a regular army that requires tanks, which they can obtain only from Syria.

Despite their military dependence on Syria, the Druze are tough mountain fighters not always willing to follow orders. The Druze have proved themselves capable of defying the Syrians when Syrian objectives differed from their own.

Damascus was having difficulty restraining Junblatt's forces from inflicting total defeat on government forces.

Damascus uses both the carrot and the stick to try to control Walid Junblatt. The Syrians augment their military aid with both economic and political incentives to Junblatt.

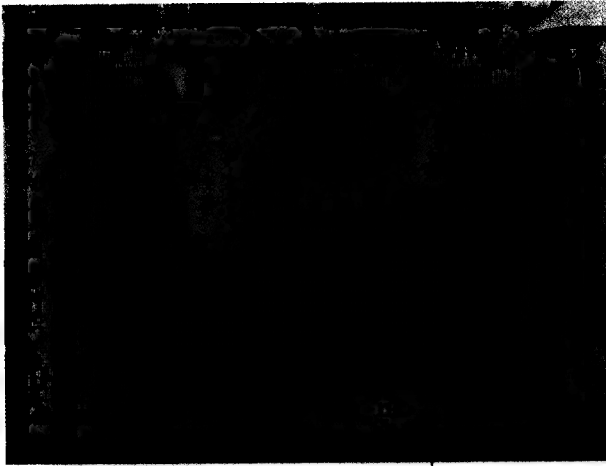
Damascus has grown disenchanted with Junblatt in recent months as its strategy has shifted from opposition to support of the Gemayel government. Junblatt continued to call for Amin Gemayel's resignation long after Assad decided last February that he wanted to keep Gemayel in office.

Overtures to the Shias

Syrian influence with Lebanon's populous Shia Muslim community is more tenuous, but we believe Damascus attaches a high priority to gaining leverage over the Shia Amal movement and its leader, Nabih Barri. Syrian leaders almost certainly believe that their ability to manipulate events in Lebanon in the future will depend on their relations with the Shias—who are the largest and least satisfied confessional group in the country. Syrian officials believe they can work with Barri, whom they consider a force for moderation among the Shias.

The Syrians realize, however, that they cannot control him.

The Syrian strategy for bringing Barri into their sphere of influence has been to threaten to undercut his position by strengthening his rivals within the Shia community. Assad, for example, has met publicly on



Syrian Vice President Khaddam escorts Druze leader Junblatt and Shia leader Barri from the Foreign Ministry in Damascus

several occasions with Muhammad Shams al-Din, Barri's principal competitor for the leadership of the Beirut Shias. The Syrians have also co-opted several top Amal leaders, including Aqil Hamiyah, the Amal chief for an important section of Beirut, and Zakariyah Hamzah, the Amal military commander for eastern Lebanon.

The Syrians also use their loose control over radical Shia groups based in the Bekaa Valley—such as Islamic Amal—to try to force Barri to come to terms with Damascus. According to

Embassy reporting, the activism and increasing popularity of radical Shia leaders such as Husayn Musawi and Subhi Tufayli have been eroding Barri's position in Amal during the past year. The US Embassy reports that Damascus allows radical Shia groups in the Bekaa greater freedom of action than Amal.

Damascus, nonetheless, remains wary of the radical Shias and has begun to curtail their freedom to operate in the Bekaa. Syrian troops have clashed with Shia extremists in the Bekaa several times since early 1984. Most of the Shia extremists advocate an Islamic revolution in Lebanon to establish an Iranian-style fundamentalist state there. The secular Syrian regime strongly opposes this goal and therefore tolerates radical Shia activities only to keep pressure on Barri and the Lebanese Government.

Despite the Syrian campaign to control Amal by co-opting its leaders and tolerating the activities of radical Shia groups, Barri has remained relatively independent of Damascus. He refused to join the National Salvation Front last fall and winter and has strongly resisted Syrian attempts to manipulate Amal.

Barri has moved to limit Syrian influence in Amal and the activities of pro-Syrian Amal officials.

Barri can ignore Syrian pressure to a greater extent than can the Druze and Palestinians because Amal depends far less on Syria for its military supplies. Amal is primarily a street militia that operates in the crowded slums of southern Beirut using small arms, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades, which the militiamen can easily obtain on the open market or from abandoned Palestinian arms caches in Beirut. Amal, moreover, has been able to capture what little heavy equipment it needs from the Lebanese Army.

Traditional Sunni Ties to Damascus

The Syrians exercise substantial influence in Lebanon's Sunni Muslim community, and wealthy Sunni politicians have traditionally maintained close political and family ties to Damascus. Although the Sunnis lack a powerful militia, Syrian leaders almost certainly continue to view their Sunni connection as valuable because the Lebanese political system reserves important government posts for Sunnis.

Damascus cultivates relationships with key Sunni politicians to guarantee that it will have friends in the Lebanese Government. Sunni Prime Minister Karami, for example, has always been inclined to follow the Syrian line on most issues. Syrian officials have also worked closely with former Sunni Prime Ministers Saib Salam, Rashid al-Sulh, Salim al-Huss, and Taqi al-Din al-Sulh, all of whom periodically travel to Damascus to confer with the Syrian Government. When Amin Gemayel agreed to appoint a new Sunni prime minister last March, virtually every candidate was to some extent sympathetic to Syria.

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Moderate Sunni leaders often welcome Syrian support because they view Syria as the only force capable of preventing complete Christian and Israeli domination of Lebanon. Many Sunni politicians have told the US Embassy that the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon remains their most pressing concern and that they do not view the Syrian forces in Lebanon in the same light. Saib Salam has told US officials that most Sunnis realize there can be no peace in Lebanon without a government on good terms with Syria.

Damascus also supports the activities of several small, militant Sunni organizations in Beirut.

the Syrians are trying to gain complete control over the leftist Murabitun militia.

the Syrians have endorsed efforts by Shaykh Abd al-Hafiz Qasim, a fundamentalist Sunni cleric, to establish another primarily Sunni militia that will serve Syrian policy aims.

Palestinian and Leftist Proxies

A number of leftist Lebanese militias and Palestinian groups active in Lebanon are Syria's most obedient proxies there. Several thousand Palestinian fighters—Fatah dissidents and members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Saiqa—remain in the country to protect the Palestinian civilian population there and to harass Israeli forces. Their presence, freedom of movement, and arms supply, however, are dependent on Damascus, and they have little choice but to serve Syrian policy aims.

Damascus uses the Palestinians for military operations that the Syrians would prefer not to undertake themselves and to monitor activities within the Lebanese Druze, Shia, and Sunni communities.

Damascus sent as many as 1,500 Palestinian guerrillas to help the Druze fight the Lebanese Army and the Christian militia in September 1983. Damascus has left some of the Palestinians in positions on the Druze-held Alayh ridge in the Shuf Region since then, primarily to keep Druze leader Junblatt's forces under surveillance,

have infiltrated hundreds of Palestinians into southern and West Beirut to work with the Shia Amal militia and to ensure that Amal adheres to Syrian policy objectives. Damascus almost certainly sees advantages in maintaining some Palestinian assets in Beirut, but we doubt that they want to re-create the de facto Palestinian rule over much of West Beirut that existed before the Israeli invasion. The Syrians fear that a massive Palestinian return to Beirut would provoke angry reactions from both Israel and the Lebanese militias. In our judgment, Damascus will restrict the number of Palestinians who return to the city in the future.

We believe Damascus uses Palestinian and radical Shia proxies to keep pressure on Israeli forces in southern Lebanon. The Syrian Government almost certainly encourages and facilitates terrorist operations in the south. The Syrians want to avoid direct military confrontation with Israel and probably hope that the use of surrogates will deflect Israeli retaliation from Syrian regular troops or Syrian territory.

The Syrians also control a number of small, ideologically oriented groups in Lebanon that usually function as proxy political organizations and militias, including the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Lebanese Arab Army, the Lebanese Ba'th Party, and the Arab Democratic Party. Damascus also supplies and manipulates Lebanon's two Communist groups, the Lebanese Communist Party and the Communist Action Organization.

Damascus occasionally uses these leftist groups to carry out military operations, but their primary purpose is to serve as political front organizations for Syria. Most, for example, have joined the various Syrian-sponsored opposition coalitions during the past decade, including the National Salvation Front. Leftist leaders also help legitimize the Syrian occupation of Lebanon by defending it publicly. Nonetheless, the Syrians keep most of them "on a short leash," according to the US Embassy in Damascus.

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A Rapprochement With the Christians?

An evolving dialogue between Damascus and the Christian Lebanese Forces militia during the past year clearly illustrates the Syrian policy of keeping a finger in every pie. Despite their support for the Druze and Muslims against the Lebanese Forces, Syrian leaders have opened [] channels of communication with Christian hardliners. []

Most Christian leaders remain publicly hostile toward Syria and are unlikely to trust offers of support from Damascus, but Syrian officials clearly attach some importance to preserving ties with the Maronites. []

[] the Syrians hope to wean the Christians away from their dependence on Israel. In our view, the Syrians believe that Maronite Christians will continue to play a key role in the Lebanese Government and Army for many years to come and therefore have concluded that a Syrian-Christian entente will be essential if Damascus is to exert maximum influence over events in Lebanon. The Syrians also want to prevent Christian hardliners from growing so alienated that they attempt to divide Lebanon into cantons controlled by different confessional groups. []

Outlook

We believe Syria will be the dominant foreign power in Lebanon for the foreseeable future. The Israeli presence in southern Lebanon dominates the attention of the Syrian Government and reinforces Damascus's determination to manipulate the Lebanese Government and the private militias. []

Damascus will continue to deploy regular Syrian forces in Lebanon but will prefer to use Palestinian and Lebanese surrogates to achieve its objectives there. In our view, most Lebanese Druze and Muslims

will grudgingly accept Syrian influence as a fact of life, although most of them dislike the Syrians. They see the events of the past year as evidence that Damascus will have its way in Lebanon. Christian hardliners will continue to oppose Syrian domination, but Lebanese Forces' military reversals during the past year have narrowed their power base and diminished their ability to do more than defend the Christian heartland. []

Temporary setbacks in Syria's attempts to stabilize the status quo in Beirut will not deter Damascus. We believe the Syrians feel they have a long-term stake in the situation in Lebanon and are determined to remain intimately involved there regardless of the costs. Even the death of Syrian President Assad probably would not alter Damascus's strategy in Lebanon. Soviet attitudes do not influence Syrian policy in Lebanon. []

Syrian leaders, in our view, do not expect an immediate solution to the Lebanese civil war and are willing to tolerate continued fighting on a limited scale. We do not believe Syria will be able to impose a comprehensive settlement on the Lebanese in the foreseeable future. Damascus, therefore, will remain satisfied with maintaining a rough balance of forces in Lebanon. In our view, this short-term policy of keeping a lid on the civil war without undertaking fundamental reforms will become increasingly difficult if confessional divisions within Lebanese society sharpen. []

In our judgment, however, the Assad regime almost certainly will not send Syrian troops back to Beirut in the foreseeable future. The Syrians want to avoid war with Israel, and any Syrian move toward reoccupying Beirut might prompt an Israeli reaction. When the Syrians occupied the city in 1976, the Israeli Army was not in Lebanon, and there was little danger of an Israeli military response. Damascus, moreover, has developed its Lebanese and Palestinian assets to the point where it has numerous policy options short of direct Syrian intervention. []

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We believe the Syrian Government will employ two different strategies to deal with the Israeli occupation. They will encourage and facilitate increasing Palestinian and radical Shia terrorism against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon. At the same time, Syrian officials have said they would agree to indirect negotiations between the Lebanese and Israeli Governments—through a third party—aimed at establishing security arrangements for southern Lebanon. [redacted]

[redacted] Damascus, however, will insist that the Lebanese refuse certain Israeli demands, such as normalization of relations, permanent Israeli observer posts, and the right to hot pursuit in Lebanese territory. [redacted]

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Implications for the United States

In our judgment, the Syrians possess the assets and determination to prevent Israel and the United States from reestablishing preeminent influence over the Lebanese Government. Syria's Lebanese allies dominate the Karami Cabinet, and President Gemayel is unlikely to count on support from the United States following the Marine withdrawal. Damascus, moreover, could mobilize its assets in Lebanon to put pressure on any Lebanese government that again attempted to play an Israeli or American "card."

[redacted]

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Nonetheless, the Syrians favor a US role in Lebanon because they believe they will need US assistance to end the Israeli occupation of the south. Syrian officials claim, both publicly and privately, that the United States can still play a positive role in that area, according to the US Embassy in Damascus. The Syrian Foreign Minister told US officials in July that Syria would like the United States to act as intermediary for indirect Lebanese-Israeli limited security negotiations. [redacted]

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Syria's capability and determination to be the dominant foreign power in Lebanon, however, imply that future negotiations concerning Lebanon will fail unless they take Syrian interests into account. Security concerns will compel Damascus to try to dictate both Lebanese domestic and foreign policy, and the Syrians are convinced that their demands will triumph over those of any other foreign power. [redacted]

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